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Spotlight on Terror

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New Security Realities and al-Qaeda's Changing Tactics: An Interview with Saad al-Faqih

By Mahan Abedin

Dr. Saad al-Faqih heads the Saudi opposition group, Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA), and is a widely acknowledged expert on al-Qaeda. Terrorism Monitor Editor Mahan Abedin conducted this interview December 12, 2005 in London.



Mahan Abedin: What is the latest information on terrorism in Saudi Arabia?

Saad al-Faqih: The latest general trend is that the jihadis have abandoned their previous tactics of targeting Westerners and the security forces. The jihadis are now focusing all their attention on the royal family. Two factors have driven this change. Firstly, the jihadis had previously avoided targeting the royals for fear of offending Muslim sensibilities. But now they believe that the prevailing opinion in Saudi Arabia and probably in the wider Muslim world is that the royal family is infidel and deserves harsh treatment. Secondly, the jihadis have finally overcome their fear of a secular takeover in the event of the sudden downfall of the House of Saud. Somebody told me that in the late 1990s bin Laden used to say that if the House of Saud is removed, the country will fall into the hands of secular forces. But now al-Qaeda believes that the regime is behaving far worse than a would-be secular system, because it is gradually destroying Islam under the banner of a false Islam. Al-Qaeda has reached the conclusion that the sudden collapse of the regime will either invite foreign interference or chaos. Both scenarios are now favored by the jihadis, who have learned great lessons in the Iraq theater over the past 33 months. In fact the jihadis would welcome an American invasion, knowing full well that it will provide a massive recruitment opportunity for them and hence they will be the ultimate winners, as they think they are proving to be in Iraq.

MA: How has the political transition (i.e. death of King Fahd) affected the struggle between the regime and al-Qaeda?

SF: The transition has little to do with al-Qaeda; in fact al-Qaeda is not in the least bit interested in these developments. The only way al-Qaeda would become interested is if a very serious and open dispute between the leading royals broke out. But this has not happened, not yet anyways. Moreover, there is no division in the regime when it comes to al-Qaeda; all the top figures of the regime, namely Abdullah, Sultan and Nayef, are determined to eradicate al-Qaeda. They are also in favor of maintaining the regime's dependence on America.

MA: But presumably al-Qaeda is monitoring developments inside the regime very closely and the decision on the timing of any assassination attempt against a leading figure would surely be determined by these internal developments.

SF: Al-Qaeda will certainly exploit any open divisions in the regime. In fact Abdullah's ascension will most likely result in open disputes, and this will benefit the jihadis. But in terms of target selection, at the very highest levels of al-Qaeda, targets are discussed and selected very carefully. But at the local leadership level, quite a few clumsy decisions have been made in the recent past. And of course at the operational level there is now a very tenuous link between bin Laden and his advisers and the local al-Qaeda leadership in Saudi Arabia.

MA: When is an attack likely to take place?

SF: If you read Zarqawi's statement after the incidents at Dammam a few months ago, you get the impression that something is going to happen very soon. Zarqawi is clearly after revenge after what happened to his brothers in Dammam.

MA: I have a couple of questions on the Internet. Firstly do you think that the jihadis now see the Internet as the most important battle space?

SF: Only the jihadis in Iraq.

MA: Why?

SF: Because the only place on earth where the jihadis feel safe is Iraq. The Internet used to be awash with jihadi material but this is becoming less so for two reasons. Firstly, Western intelligence services are now aggressively targeting jihadi websites and are showing a greater determination to close them down completely. In the past they would allow some of the more interesting ones to remain in operation

so that they could covertly gather intelligence on the webmasters and the contributors. Dozens of websites have been closed in recent months. Secondly, Western governments have provided software and other expertise to the Saudi regime to trace individual contributors to web forums. But the jihadis in Iraq feel safe and secure because they have satellite Internet connections and they can set up temporary websites and upload files very easily. The invasion of Iraq has boosted the fortunes of jihadis in many respects, and the Internet is no exception.

MA: Are you saying the Americans are providing the Saudi authorities with the requisite technology to trace contributors to jihadi websites?

SF: Precisely! The problem is that the Saudis are using the technology to trace and detain non-jihadi authors and contributors as well. In fact several people connected to our organization have been detained in recent months as a result of the transfer of technological expertise.

MA: What happens to these people after they are detained?

SF: Firstly they conduct a thorough search of their computers to trace all their communications and contacts. The detainees are then subjected to prolonged and tough interrogations.

MA: Are they subsequently released?

SF: No, they remain in detention because the Saudis now consider a wide-range of people as critical security threats.

MA: How many forum users have been arrested?

SF: The figures are no less than 2,000, but this includes both jihadi and non-jihadi forum contributors.

MA: Do you think the jihadis are trying to consolidate their assets on the Internet? I refer specifically to the emergence of the "Global Islamic Media Front".

SF: I think this Global Islamic Media Front is just a name. The jihadis have used over-arching and inclusive names like this before. In any case the jihadis do not need to consolidate their resources, because the existing set-up works quite well.

MA: I have a few questions on Afghanistan. Do you believe the Taliban insurgency is intensifying?

SF: Yes it is. The spread of crime and lawlessness was the single most important factor which led to the emergence and empowerment of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The same situation is developing now where the central Karzai government, which is heavily sponsored by America and the West, only exerts control in the major cities and the north of the country. The vast southern and eastern regions are clamoring for the return of the Taliban. Another factor to consider is that when the Americans first moved into Afghanistan in late 2001, they paid huge bribes to the major tribes to buy their compliance. But the effect of this has been short-lived as they can not continue to bribe influential forces indefinitely. I have been told that the Saudis have paid no less than \$300 million to southern tribes in order to ensure their compliance with American interests and wishes in Afghanistan.

MA: This is Saudi money spent on American national security?

SF: Exactly!

MA: Some jihadis have begun to talk about a great new jihad in Afghanistan on a par with the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s. Do you share this assessment?

SF: I think it is too early to make such predictions. But the general trends point toward a deterioration of security in Afghanistan. In fact Zawahiri's latest statement highlights this.

MA: Do you think there is going to be greater resistance to the continuing U.S. and Western military presence in the short-term?

SF: There is now a sense that the aura and prestige attached to the swift American victory in Afghanistan is well and truly over.

MA: Do you think the Taliban and other insurgent forces in Afghanistan are copying the methods and tactics of the Iraqi insurgents?

SF: Maybe, but these tactics are nothing new. They date back to Lebanon in the 1980s.

MA: To what extent is al-Qaeda involved in the intensifying Afghan insurgency?

SF: I'd say that most of the training and planning are masterminded by al-Qaeda.

MA: Let us discuss the recent Amman Bombings. Were the bombings a blunder by Zarqawi?

SF: The consensus is that it was a reckless move, even by jihadi standards. It was certainly not useful to the jihadi cause.

MA: What was Zarqawi trying to achieve?

SF: Zarqawi hates the Jordanian regime and simply striking at it and proving to them that he can breach their security was his primary aim.

MA: How do you interpret the use of female suicide bombers both in that attack and other attacks in Iraq, for instance the suicide bombing in Tal Afar?

SF: There are two reasons why females are being deployed for these operations. Firstly, a large number of women are ready to join jihad. Secondly, women want to exact revenge for assaults against them and their families. This is particularly the case in Iraq where civilians have borne the brunt of the fighting.

MA: Does this also indicate an ideological shift by the jihadis?

SF: No, it does not. Although jihad is a task generally for men, there are no Islamic injunctions against women fighting on the frontlines of jihad. Moreover, jihadis have been training their wives and sisters for combat and jihad since the early 1980s. In many Arab tribes women have the position of knights and dominate the toughest of men. Those who raise the issue of an ideological shift on the part of the jihadis are driven by Western prejudices against Muslim societies.

MA: Will Jordan be attacked again?

SF: If there are further attacks, they won't be as stupid and self-defeating as the suicide bombings in the hotels. Zarqawi is coming under huge pressure, especially by other jihadi leaders in Iraq who are now very skeptical about him. They begrudge his arrogance and recklessness.

MA: Which other country might be attacked by the Zarqawi network in the foreseeable future?

SF: Saudi Arabia. In fact it is the most logical choice, especially in light of Zarqawi's statement on the recent events in Dammam.

MA: Do you believe the Zawahiri letter to Zarqawi is genuine?

SF: Analytically speaking I believe it is genuine because it conforms to Zawahiri's mentality. But I have no information to this effect. But I was expecting this type of letter simply because even hardcore jihadis believe Zarqawi has gone too far in his arrogance and recklessness.

MA: What is the most striking feature about the letter?

SF: I think it shows that al-Qaeda secretly thinks it might have made a mistake by appointing Zarqawi as its leading representative in Iraq. Zarqawi is far too decisive as a commander, and this is what drives his arrogance. Some people say there are many people in the jihadi circles who are trying to reach bin Laden in order to convince him to remove Zarqawi as the local al-Qaeda commander in Iraq. The jihadi leaders in Iraq have largely kept silent but they are not at all happy with Zarqawi's conduct. One of their biggest criticisms is on Zarqawi's decision to stay and fight in Fallujah once the Americans decided to attack the town in November 2004. The other jihadi leaders wanted to avoid a direct large-scale confrontation with American forces and instead concentrate on exhausting them through a war of attrition. At that time the other jihadi leaders not only avoided criticizing Zarqawi but in fact decided to stay with his forces and fight the massive U.S. Marines assault on the town.

MA: Are there any other striking features about the letter?

SF: It indicates that Zawahiri remains al-Qaeda's main strategist and that his understanding of the battle space and how it will evolve in the immediate future surpasses that of any other strategist, whether jihadi or American.



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